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Turner: USSR told truth about decision

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NEWPORT, R.I. – The former "chief of the spies" for the United States believes that the Soviet Union has "told us the truth" about how the decision was made to shoot down Korean Air Lines Flight 7.

But at the same time, Stansfield Turner, a retired Navy admiral and head of the Central Intelligence Agency, told a Naval War College audience Tuesday night that he finds it "inconceivable" that the US government could have been involved in using the Korean airliner as bait in any intelligence-gathering function.

"I can't swear on a stack of Bibles that the Koreans weren't doing it," he added. "But I see no reason why they would."

Turner said there are already alternative US intelligence systems in place that are capable of gathering any spy data that the straying aircraft could have collected.

In fact, he regretted that the US government's account of its own monitoring of the Korean airliner incident disclosed "information about our intercept capabilities that we have never given out in this kind of specific detail."

There is an intelligence risk during this kind of a crisis, he said, "that something comes out that should not."

Turner guessed that the Soviet Union's policy of rigid control of its borders led to the airline tragedy. "I think their system went into action, and I think they told us the truth. The man on the spot made the decision." He undoubtedly had informed Moscow of the situation, Turner speculated, and "when he didn't get a veto, he went ahead in a rather mechanistic way."

[The former chairman of Japan's joint chiefs of staff said yesterday he believes that the Soviet pilot who shot down the airliner would have found it "extremely difficult – almost impossible – to have identified the type of aircraft or its emblem" in the early morning darkness Sept. 1, the Los Angeles Times reported.

[Goro Takeda, 61, a retired general in the Air Self-Defense Force, spoke at the Foreign Correspondents Club. He pointed out that on the day of the incident the sun did not rise over the Soviet island of Sakhalin, near where the plane was shot down, until 4:50 a.m. Except for the light of the partial moon, darkness would have prevailed until at least 3:30 a.m., four minutes after the Soviet pilot reported firing his missiles, Takeda said.

[With those conditions, he added, the pilot ought to have been able to identify the Korean jet as a "large aircraft." However, with the likelihood that all window shades were drawn – blocking any view of lights inside the aircraft – the Soviet pilot could not easily have distinguished it as a civilian passenger jetliner, Takeda said.

[The Soviet pilot would probably have had to have been as close as about 1000 feet to have seen the hump that gives the Boeing 747 its unique silhouette, he said. Records of the Soviet pilot's conversations with his ground commander, however, indicate the pilot never mentioned being closer to the aircraft than 2 kilometers, about 1.25 miles.]

It was a nostalgic visit for Turner, who had been president of the Naval War College before his old Annapolis classmate, President Jimmy Carter, tapped him to head the CIA. When that happened, Turner recalled, "I knew 31 years of a naval career were behind me and I was in a new career as chief of the spies."

It was Turner's task to guide the CIA during the years it was placed under a degree of congressional and presidential oversight following revelations in 1975 of serious past abuses.

Turner acknowledged there still "is a deep, latent distrust of the CIA in a significant segment of our society." But he maintained that current controls over the agency allow it to do its jobs without much risk of serious abuse in the future. He believes "that another round of intense public criticism of the CIA could be fatal."

The agency's main problem, Turner said, is that its three main divisions – spying, collecting technical data and analysis – operate much too independently, "like three autonomous agencies."

He was unable to resolve that problem, and he said it will be important for a future director to "complete the transition to one agency."

Turner was critical of the attitude of many in the intelligence field who say they cannot operate successfully under any higher oversight. Turner said he searched the CIA files and "I could find no evidence that the wild schemes of the past, under inadequate supervision, had actually produced significant intelligence. What I did find was that the secrecy of spying engenders a mystique leading people to believe you can only spy if you are not supervised, and that is just not so."

But Turner defended the CIA's covert action role as being part of "our arsenal of diplomatic tools."

"You don't want to skip from diplomacy to war if you can accomplish your means by covert techniques," he said. "There's nothing immoral in trying to influence events in another country." That strong statement went unchallenged before the overflow audience of about 1200 naval officers and their spouses.